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A P E G A D O B O I

Bullfighting is not practiced in Brazil, and never was, so far as I know; but the bull, as the largest and fiercest animal with which man has to deal, holds still a romantic appeal for the people of that land, where cattle raising has been since the early settlement one of the principal resources and occupations. Mankind has never entirely recovered from the days of chivalry, and a man on horseback is something of a super-human figure in our imagination. Thus it is that the vaqueiro, or cowboy, whose art requires a rare combination of skill and daring, is a person calculated to catch the popular imagination, and whose work has long been idealized in poetry and song.

Especially in the sertão, which is a range country like much of our own West, but where the primitive conditions of fifty years ago still obtain to a large extent, the vaqueiro is a very important figure. And there it is that there is realized now and then one of the most striking and characteristic competitions known to the world in these modern times, known as the "pega do boi" (catching the bull).

There are two types of this competition, the milder of which is generally called a vaqueijada (cow-fest, if you like) or corrida de mourão. (Corrida, of course, is "race", and mourão was one of a pair of riders who took part in the ancient jogo de canas, a form of riding with lances that took the place of the tournaments of the days of chivalry.) One of these was held in Garanhuns in January, 1949, at which I had the good fortune to be a spectator.

Notice having been published throughout the region for some time, the vaqueijada was held on January 6, the dia dos reis, or "Old Christmas", which of course falls in the hot season there. A place was arranged in the city park, and rude stands erected for the accommodation of the spectators on both sides of the arena, and corrals for the animals. The arena itself was, I should say, about twenty yards wide, and a hundred and fifty yards long, being closed at the end where the race was to begin by the fences of the corrals, and open at the other end. There was a special stand for the judges and other officials, equipped with a loud speaker for announcing the results.

The object is for the rider to "throw" the bull, by grasping its tail, then, setting spurs to his horse, giving a quick sideways pull on the tail, which throws the bull off balance, causing him to fall all in a heap. The rider then quickly leaps from his horse, and before the bull can recover from the shock and confusion of his fall grasps one of his forefeet and hooks it over the horn, from which position the bull is unable to extricate it, and therefore unable to get up, so that even the fiercest bull is rendered completely incapable of resistance, and at the mercy of his captor.

At this vaquejada there were thousands of spectators, and there must have been a hundred vaqueiros, though I made no effort to count them nor inquire the number, all mounted on beautiful horses, with fancy saddles and bridles, and dressed in resplendant cowboy suits, some affecting the traditional leather coat, trousers and hat, others using khaki shirt and breeches, and a bright colored neckerchief. They seemed to feel themselves very much the center of attention, and while they were not in the arena they spent the time galloping about, here, there and yonder. Very dashing and brave looking fellows they were.

Bulls, cows and steers were used indiscriminately, and they were kept in a corral at the south end of the arena. After passing through the arena, they were driven by attendants to another corral, whence they were transferred as needed to the first corral. On receiving the signal from the judges, the attendants would open the gate, and prodding the animals with poles through the fence, would induce one to pass through into the arena, whereupon the gate was closed. The frightened animal would usually go through the gate on the run, and run full speed the whole length of the arena, which was, of course, what was desired.

The riders worked in pairs, but only one of the two was supposed to catch the bull; the other was to help by riding on the other side, and thus keeping the animal in position so that his partner could catch it readily. The animal must be thrown before passing a certain line about 150 yards from the starting point, or the trial was lost; and the riders were by no means always successful. Sometimes the rider failed to get hold of the tail properly in time, and at other times the horse seemed to lack sufficient advantage of speed to make it possible to throw a large animal.

The pairs of riders worked successively, the judge announcing over the loud speaker each time who were the riders for this trial, and who for the next, so that the next pair could be in readiness. Thus, when the signal was given, the riders were waiting by the corral gate, and the moment the bull came through they were after him. I watched their technique; the rider did not grab for the tail, but placed his hand on the rump, whence it slid naturally to the base of the tail, and down the tail to the end, which was then grasped firmly for the pull. In order to throw the bull off balance it is necessary to have a strong, well trained horse, with a good reserve of speed; and certainly the rider needs to have a very firm and sure seat. Sometimes a bull would be pulled so far out of alignment that he appeared to be running diagonally, but would still manage to maintain his equilibrium; but when everything went right the bull would come down in the midst of the arena, in a cloud of dust, and amid the applause of the spectators. At the end of the contest, the pair of riders that had been successful in the greatest number of trials would be pronounced winners.

In these trials the riders did not secure the animal after it was thrown, but it was allowed to get up, and then was driven to the corral. I was astonished to see how quickly they could get up; and it seemed to me that when it is necessary to secure the bull (by placing the foot over the horn) the rider has need of the utmost speed and dexterity to leap from the horse and secure the bull's foot before he can get up; otherwise the rider may find himself on foot and face to face with a savage bull, which would seem to be a very undesirable situation in which to find oneself.

This, as I said, was the vaqueijada, or corrida de mouraô. The real pega do boi is quite different. I regret that I was never present at one of these, but I have had it minutely described for me by those who have been present.

When a fazendeiro decides to give a pega do boi, he must begin his preparations well in advance. He first selects the bull, which should be one and one half to two years old, and makes announcement of the intended competition. He turns the bull out on the open range, and sends to all the neighbors, near and far, a minute description of the bull, so that he may be recognized easily. This is important, for everyone is expected to cooperate by harrying this bull whenever they see him, running after him,

and doing everything they can think of to make him as wild as possible. After about a year of this preparation, during which the bull has grown into a mature and powerful animal, while increasing in ferocity because of the "war of nerves", the fazendeiro announces the date of the catching of this bull.

It is not necessary to have an invitation; all vaqueiros are automatically invited. I have heard of as many as 130 being present at one time, and as of course there are many other guests besides the vaqueiros, it makes quite a sizeable party. They usually arrive a day or so before the actual day of the competition, and oxen and sheep are killed, ranchos (temporary shelters of brush) are erected, and other preparations made. There is plenty to eat, and plenty of cachaça to drink, and everybody has a good time.

On the great day, it is customary to have a priest present, to bless the vaqueiros before the sport begins. After the blessing, off they go, to look for the bull, and to catch him when found. It is no small task just to find him. Cases are on record when the bull was found within an hour after the hunt started; but sometimes he is not even found the first day. The favorite place to look for him is near the water hole where he is accustomed to drink. The vaqueiros scatter out, and search, each according to his own best judgment as to where the bull may be found, and each one of course burning with ambition to find him first, and catch him before anyone else gets the chance.

When a vaqueiro sights the bull he gives a yell, and sets out after him. The bull, already wild, and frightened by the tumult, takes out at full speed for the thickest brush, and it is a point of honor among vaqueiros not to flinch from any obstacle in pursuit of him. Most of the terrain in the sertão is very rugged, with hills and mountains, ravines, rocks and cliffs, and all overgrown with the thick brush of the caatinga, a large part of which is armed with the most formidable thorns. But uphill, downhill, and through the thickest brush, the bull stops for nothing, and the vaqueiro comes right after him. Any other vaqueiros who happen to be near enough to see and hear the discovery of the bull follow hard behind the first, each in the hope of getting ahead of the others, and being the first to catch the bull. This may easily happen,

as one's horse may stumble or be forced to give up the chase, and the bull may change his direction, placing another vaqueiro in the front; and when one comes up with the bull it is no easy task to throw him. But the chase continues until one vaqueiro is successful.

When the bull goes down, the vaqueiro must leap from his horse quickly and secure him, in the manner already indicated. The next task is to cut the tip of the tail with the brush of long hair, which serves as the trophy of victory, and is worn with great pride by the victor. Next, a cowbell is fastened around the bull's neck, a rope is attached securely to his horns, and a carêta (a leather blind, largely obscuring the bull's vision) bound over his eyes, and, securing the rope to his saddle, the vaqueiro allows the bull to get up, and leads him back to the house. But even this is no simple matter, for the wild, savage creature makes every effort to escape, or to gore the horse, which he sometimes succeeds in doing, in spite of all the efforts of horse and rider. Sometimes with a well trained horse the rider dismounts and accompanies the horse on foot, thus to lighten the horse's burden, as the bull goes unwillingly, and must often be dragged by main force. But it is usually considered safer to ride, as in that way the rider can guide the horse and help him to escape from a sudden attack by the bull.

When the triumphal procession arrives at the house, the victor is rewarded and the bull is slain, and made into barbecue for the guests. Customs vary; sometimes the fazendeiro gives a prize to the winner and gives the bull for the barbecue, while in other cases the bull himself is the winner's prize, but carries with it the moral obligation to sacrifice it for the popular good. In either case the bull's fate is the same.

Besides these contests, the custom of "throwing the bull" has its practical utility, for catching animals for branding, or for any other purpose. I am told that in driving a herd of cattle, when one animal becomes unruly, and unwilling to go in the direction desired, the vaqueiro has but to ride after it and throw it down once, when it will almost always feel itself worsted, and become very meek and tractable.